

The People's Party

by George L. Barcus

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I The rise of the Peoples Party - two causes.

A Remote

- 1 Justified by dissatisfaction generally
- 2 Discontent in the human breast.

B Direct

- 1 Crop failures, draughts,
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II The Development of Populism.

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- 1 Money plank,
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C The shadow of the party of to-day.

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B I B L I O G R A P H Y . -

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Annie L. Diggs, Topeka.

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The rise of the Peoples Party is attributed largely to discontent. In discontent there are the remote and the direct causes. The remote cause is one that is potent and inherent in the human breast - to be up and doing - to be striving, and seeking for new fields of activity. The direct cause is dissatisfaction, coupled with a socialistic tendency that has been cropping out, and that has been dominant in political parties since and even before the close of the civil war.

The Honorable John Madden, of Emporia, in a political speech in the fall of 1898, spoke of the rise of the Peoples Party. He justified the movement by tracing the aggressive nations of people in their development from the time the curtain of history rose, up to the appearance of the Peoples Party. Mr. Madden said in substance: The party rose out of the same aggressive spirit that led the Aryans to make their famous invasion, that caused the sweeping down of Huns and the Tartars upon the Germanic tribes, that drove the hardy Jutes, Anglos and Saxons from their fatherland to the invasion of England, and that forced the stubborn English chiefs to pillage the indefatigable

Scotch. We see in the movement the satisfactions of the desires and the longings of men, some of genius, some half insane, some avaricious, such as Columbus, Ponce de Leon and Pizarro. However, the great remote cause, if we may attribute anything to it, must be considered the insatiable, inherent desire in the human breast to be on the alert, and to be domineering.

Coupled with the spirit of discontent, were the immediate causes which led to this unprecedented uprising. Among these were the murmurings of the unemployed, the feelings of the great common people that they were being crushed by capital, that they were wholly under the sway of the slimy octopus that controlled the grain markets, the stock markets and the produce markets; paid what it pleased and in turn charged them what it pleased for the commodities they were forced to buy. Then, too, was the quiet growth of trusts, with imminent dangers, which the untutored thought to be their certain destruction. Also powerful was the feeling, among the yeoman classes, that socialism in some form would for them be a desirable feature.

* Again the common people constantly bore in mind the tremendous frauds of the Pacific railways. Fifty millions of dollars had been loaned outright by the government, with no attempt at a return. A grant of

* J. B. Carey, Forum, Vol 16 p 240

land equal to an empire had been made to the company. Even when the road had been practically built and given to the company, it demanded exorbitant freight rates, interfered in politics and made and unmade towns at its will. With this enterprise came also immense purchases of lands, in close proximity to the road by Eastern syndicates with the sole idea of speculation. All of these movements, more or less remote, tended to cause unrest among the poorer classes of people.

Preceding the Peoples Party and accelerating the feeling of unrest were the Greenbackers, the Patrons of Husbandry and the Grange. The latter two movements had in view the protection of the small farmer from iniquitous capital. Following this movement was the Alliance, the immediate predecessor of the once famous Peoples Party. All of these movements had some merits. The Grange was originally a well intending organization: it brought farmers into touch with one another, and encouraged intercourse and exchange of ideas that resulted in good. But, like the Patrons of Husbandry and the Alliance, it failed because it did not include all who were interested in agriculture and because an organization without an attractive feature cannot be maintained in a sparsely settled community. Land holders, not farmers, were excluded and these were the very men on

whom depended the success of the plan, for these were the men with the money, and the brains, and the men most keenly interested in agriculture. It was the excluded class that might have been able to carry out the reforms, if such reforms were really needed.

The first Alliance, whether formed for political reasons or not, had also some good features; bringing the smaller land holders together where they discussed crop conditions, experiments and improvements. This move originated in Texas and was designed to oppose the wholesale buying of public lands by private individuals. Its aim was to form a union to oppose a combine, and in this it must of necessity fall, owing to its looseness of structure and the human desire to seize a bargain. From Texas, the Alliance spread to Louisiana in 1887, then to Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, South Carolina and North Carolina. The spirit of the southern Alliance was linked with that of Illinois, and the movement stretched to Kansas in '89 and '90, and swept over the Sunflower state, parched and dry, with unrivaled rapidity. Iowa and Dakota soon followed. Out of this an organization was effected in St. Louis in 1890 and was known as the National Peoples Party. Prior to this, however, Franklin County of this state had placed a

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county ticket in the field in 1889, and had elected it with Governor Elder urging the forces. From Franklin the party spread to Cowley, and over all parts of the state.

Kansas, owing to her geographical location and the spirit of her people, became the stamping-ground of Populism as she was the bone of contention during those tragic days of slavery in the civil war. Dissatisfaction on account of crop failures and the inflamed minds of the people fanned to blazing by unprincipled, disgruntled and ignorant politicians led to a phenomenal growth of the Populist movement.

It was a time when no more interesting study of society could be found. Prior to the campaign of 1890, the common laborer, the small land holder and many people from all classes flocked to town in hordes, packed opera houses and country school houses, neglecting their work, to hear some narrow, infamous politician argue that perilous times were at hand; that our splendid government was toppling between perpetuity and decadence, on account of corruption in the old parties and the choking of private industry by grimy capital. The most heinous of charges were urged against the government.

* It was affirmed that the president and his cabinet were

F Ben. Oliver

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tools of the money power, that their salaries alone were sufficient to ruin the government in ten years. One Populist orator of my own knowledge stood before an audience of farmers and stoutly affirmed that the President was drawing fifty millions of dollars yearly, and that his cabinet were receiving fabulous sums quite in proportion.

Such disgraceful lies caught many of the drifting untutored who flocked to the Populist standard, eagerly clutching at even a straw for relief from the supposed grinding oppression. Added to this were stories of how the new party would shield the farmer and solidify the government, by means of voluminous issues of money, its government ware houses, its cheap loans and its election of stalwart, sturdy farmers to the places of governmental control. Added to this were promises of loans to farmers for improving their homes at ridiculously low rates of interest - from two to three per cent - the principle to be paid at will. Then too the supply of money which the wild eyed politicians supposed to be cornered was to be fabulously added to. The per capita circulation was to be maintained at fifty dollars; whenever it sunk below this mark, the government was to issue more money and scatter it broad cast about the country. This money was to be fiat money with nothing back of it,

and of no particular value save that it should bear the government stamp. Gigantic fortunes were to be seized upon by government authority, and distributed among the poor and down-trodden classes. Great land holdings were to be dissolved and parcelled out among the unfortunate homeless.

All of this is mere political stuff; promises made by men of low political caliber and of lower political principle. But these promises were made at a time when the country was in a condition of tumult - in the throes of distress we may say, and when the people would grasp at anything for a change. Men who made these promises in the fall of 1890 drew tremendous crowds of the firey horde, but they could not nor did they intend to carry out such measures. But this early prelude had a magnetic effect on the people all over the middle west. In the campaign of 1892 the Peoples Party cast 1,000,000 votes as many as elected Abraham Lincoln President of the United States, gave its President twenty-two electoral votes, swept four states and placed eight members in the house.

But this was the insane period of the Peoples Party. It may be unjust to ally this period with the party, but it was undoubtedly connected and certainly had something to do with the sweeping results of 1892. The saner

period of the movement came later. The foibles and idiosyncracies of prophetic leaders, such as government store houses, sub-treasury schemes, the dissolving of fortunes and land holdings and the fiat money issues, gave way to things bearing a resemblance of sanity. The Peoples Party, just as all new movements, was necessarily led by men, pioneers in the move, that were over zealous, and often wild and flighty. Then, too, they were considered so by people generally because they championed a bold and new plan.

The real study of the Peoples Party cannot well begin until we examine the platform for which it stood in its first national campaign in 1892. The following is the gist of the demands of the party as found in its platform, and taken from an article by Senator Peffer, one of the ardent supporters of the movement. That view will not be discussed here, but will be taken up in showing why the party failed. * "The Peoples Party demands that the functions of government be exercised only for the mutual benefit of all people. Its motto is equal rights to all, and special privileges to none. Its creed all men are born equal." The great mission of the party was to emancipate labor. The following demands also are from the article of Senator Peffer's.

I "An exclusive national currency in amount suffi-

* Senator Peffer. N. A. Review vol 157 pp 665-671

cient for all uses for which money is needed by the people. To consist of gold, silver and paper coined on equal terms, each and all legal tender in the payment of debts of whatever nature or amount. Also receivable for taxes and public dues."

II "That rates of interest for money be reduced to the level of average net profits in productive industries."

III "That means of public transportation be brought under public control to the end that carriage shall not cost more than it is reasonably worth, and that charges be made uniform."

IV "That large private land holdings be discouraged by law."

V "The party also favors the free and unlimited coinage of gold, silver and paper by the general government."

The great principle of the party, it will be remembered, however, was the old Greenback idea of the free and unlimited coinage of silver.

The platform as a whole is a new and daring stroke. It contains some good ideas, but as an entirety it is not good because experience has shown its ground ideas to be impractical. Had the people been ready for such an abrupt change when the spirit of Populism was at its height the party might have come into power, but it took

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too long to instill the doctrines and spirit waned.

With the early discussion, and the gist of the platform in mind, we shall try to explain sociologically why the party declined, and then show the present trend of the party.

Populists, themselves, who now cling to the early faith, affirm that the party declined primarily because of the unfaithfulness of its leaders. These were of two classes - good men, faithful and sincere, and other men who might be classed as disappointed politicians, and reformers of one sort or another who have always made a rush for the new parties. The latter class predominated in the Populist Party. In order to gain power they frequently bartered influence and were untrue to the party they were supposed to uphold. Governor Elder of Ottawa attributes the decline of the party to traitors, and the mad rush of small politicians to join the party in the hope that they might attain prominence and influence. In connection with the traitorous leaders comes the fact that the spirit of its most ardent supporters were much ameliorated after the final second defeat in '96, by seeing the strength of the old parties rejuvenating.

The free coinage of silver, upon which the party based so much, has never and can never be successfully

carried on by any single nation. We may take the argument of the Populists and show its weakness. Admitting that gold, paper and silver should all be coined at equal ratios, that all should be legal tender, and, admitting that silver will pass at par in its own country, even though it does contain only sixty cents worth of silver, it naturally follows that that country will be flooded with silver from other countries, that foreigners will bring their silver into the country, have it coined and passed into circulation at a big gain to themselves and an equal loss to the country having the free coinage system. Again admitting that silver passes at legal tender in its own nation it will not pass in a country not having free coinage, and at the same ratio, except for its bullion value of sixty cents per dollar. The free coinage of silver results in a loss to the man who must redeem balances in foreign nations in silver, and this must necessarily cheapen the silver in its own country, thus driving the gold from circulation and leaving the depreciated money the medium of exchange. It was this dogged urging of a movement that has always resulted disastrously, that helped defeat the Peoples movement in its national elections.

Another of the foundation stones of the party was based on error - that of "all men being born equal." If

the expression means anything, it means equal before the law, but the Populist party construed it literally and argued that all men are or should be equal in opportunity, or more clearly as Mr. Peffer put it "equal rights to all." Such a thing is impossible as men vary in keenness of intellect, in activity and ability. The idea is so absurd as to prove false on its face. There never has nor never will be a time when the man with mind and ability can be kept down, regardless of rights or laws. We have only to look around us to see the coming men, they are men who are at work and are not crying for mercy.

Then, too, the Peoples Party mistook the spirit of the American monopoly, and the trust, and the heaping up of vast fortunes. That capital should unite is no more unnatural than that labor should unite. Trusts when rightly managed are a good to the public. It is cheaper to have an industry under one roof and governed by one head than to have a dozen smaller concerns engaged in the same business. More than that there is gain in better equipment, in easier facilities and in lower prices all of which revert in the favor of the common people. As long as the philanthropic spirit dominates in the American capitalists as it does to-day there is no danger from trusts. The heaping up of a tremendous

fortune of to-day is only its tearing down a few years hence. The Peoples Party instead of showing generosity to the capitalists threatened them with destruction, thereby striking at the men who are making possible the phenomenal forward strides the nation is making to-day.

When the Peoples Party appeared in the political arena, two distinct classes of common people were striving to solve the same problem - that of the distribution of wealth. On the one hand were the city laborers manufacturing more than enough to supply the wants of the world. On the other hand were the agriculturalists growing more than enough to supply the wants of the world. While the farmer was dormant and was led stupidly by his political manager, the city laborer was keenly awake and saw in the tariff of '86 and '92 his existence and his success. To him his bread and butter hinged on the protection of the American products. At an inopportune moment to the Peoples Party - when its leaders were not shrewd enough to see it, nor to combine the two measures, the free coinage of silver was doggedly urged by the party. In this the eastern manufacturer and his laborers saw failure, distress and the decadence of their business. To the western and southern farmer and to the mine owner it looked favorable and was erroneously taken for the day of success. In this moment of uncertainty,

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preparatory to the great national battle of '96, the Republican party was in battle array to protect its pristine citadel of tariff and sound money, and the Democratic forces were just drawing up for the national convention, when again came the cry from both sides for fusion. Both sides, eager for victory, and urged on by bolting free silver Republicans and Prohibitionists, rushed to unite. The Populist party unwittingly merged itself into the Democratic party, thereby widening the gulf between the two sections of laborers who should have been united in a great and truly a Peoples Party on account of mutual interests.

Thus the party that should have been a party passed the opportune moment. It might have secured a splendid victory, but it was swallowed up and lost in the great political whirlpool and practically relegated to oblivion.

Populism now is in its third stage. It has reached a saner period than at any time in its history. The later stage of Populism or as Senator Harris says: "The Peoples party is based on the public control of money and utilities as discussed by Clark, Ely and other political economists." All of the wild fancies of the early Populists have passed away, the free silver craze has had its day, and the party has returned to the one idea of governmental control.

Municipal ownership, perhaps a fore-runner of government ownership, is being adopted by many municipalities, and seemingly with satisfactory results, but municipal ownership is not the same as government ownership of the great industries which the Populist leaders have been urging. The plans that are being urged now are purely socialistic. If the government owns and operates the railway and the telegraph system what will it not operate? It is just as practical to argue that the land should be owned and operated by the government, so that greedy land holders cannot charge tenants exorbitant rates of rent, as it is to argue that the government should own and operate the railways so that there will be no discrimination in freight rates.

But if the government should buy the railways and the telegraph it will soon buy everything, and we shall have socialism pure and simple. The government of the United States is strong and stable because we have freedom of capital and freedom of enterprise. Men labor because they can enjoy the fruits of their toil. The question is whether it is better to suffer slight inconveniences and pay perhaps a little more under private ownership or whether we shall have the great enterprises under governmental control - doing away with independence and freedom of capital and labor, and pay perhaps a

little less for service. The later Peoples Party favors the latter plan, and in so doing it strikes at the very vitals of American strength in crippling the opportunity for free investment.

But these leaders do not have plans to raise the gigantic sums of money that would be necessary to buy these enterprises, nor do they consider what the dangers would be of the 1,000,000 men the railways and telegraph employ if they were in the hands of a political party.

However, the Peoples Party has been a good thing for the nation in some ways if not in others. It has caused the common people to take an interest in affairs, to pry into conditions, and has shown clearly that the political boss has had his day. More than that the party has made many good suggestions, has buried sectional strife, and has brought before the minds of the people that the laboring people are those for whom legislation should be made, and that the great problem is after all the distribution of wealth.

The Peoples Party has risen, grown and declined. Its decline is perhaps permanent. It can never be the new party unless it is entirely rejuvenated. The new party which Benjamin F. Mills sees forming is not an upstart, but says Mills "Its body is being grown; it will become the most comprehensive, picturesque, historical,

ethical, political party which has ever stepped forth on God's earth. Universal as well as national. Its commanding and baptizing faiths are social. It is the party of the inspired peoples." The Peoples party was narrow, was based on error, has none of the qualities of a great party and is dead. Only the shadow of the once promising party controlled the convention of the allied Peoples Party at the Louisville convention in April, and the prominent feature was the old idea of governmental control. The new party, an outgrowth of the Populist party, stands for nothing new, it only opposes the two great parties as the Peoples Party once did, and it too, must fail on account of its structure as did the Peoples Party.

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